

Film / Photography

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No Choice: Adapt and Suppress

Strategies for survival in the former communist European film landscapes.

When the Iron Curtain fell in 1989 an initial euphoria prevailed on all sides, but the mists of enthusiasm were soon dispelled. At that time a Slovak film colleague asked me how long I supposed it would take until his country reached the same economic standard as Austria. Ten years at the least, I told him; he looked at me dubiously and laughed at me as an excessively sceptical optimist. In the meantime fifteen years have passed, a number of our neighbour countries are now members of the European Union but with massive restrictions, above all as regards the free movement of labour. There are still border checks, and nobody is even thinking about a currency union at present.

The said colleague has now lived in Prague for several years, he programmes an international independent film series for the Karlovy Vary festival and learned a few months ago that, after ten years, his TV magazine programme Filmopolis will no longer be produced and broadcast by Czech television. He developed the idea of making this programme because earlier at home in Bratislava he was able for years to receive the ORF programme *Apropos Film*, which seemed to him like a sheet anchor against state isolation. But the ORF/ZDF programme has also been dropped from our screens, after running for more than 20 years. The briefest of news flashes, buzzword images in a colourful and superficial mix of information are what will be produced in the future – both here and in Slovakia.

But back to the euphoria that vanished so quickly. Many directors, above all older ones, suddenly found themselves in an existential and creative vacuum, as Alexej German put it: "We knew what was forbidden and tried to do it all the same. Today everything seems allowed and nobody knows any longer what he should make." The supposed new freedom meant for many rapid disappointment. Like a confirmation of Werner Schneyder's commentary on the political changes in Europe ("The right ones have lost, but the wrong ones have won") ideological censorship soon mutated into an economic one. Gamblers, gold-diggers as well as run-of-the-mill criminals attempted to establish themselves in the film production business, along with many naïve and calculating servants of the economy, whose sole creed is the highest possible attendance figures.

As a consequence many critical themes, above all an unsparing examination of the recent past, have become taboo. Instead recourse is made to what were once taboo themes, cheap drug, mafia and prostitution stories, young, escapist, loud and violent cinema (Serbia) or nostalgic, superficial cinema with a broad appeal (Czech Republic).

Precisely in the latter two countries, in contrast to all the others, where Hollywood bulk goods also dominate and local film production has been marginalized, national cinema has an enormously high viewer response. The reasons may be different but the strategies are

very similar: entertainment, the escape from reality and a collective, conciliatory nostalgia. It is a good thing that, despite the dominant profit-oriented way of thinking, a number of individual directors refuse to allow themselves to be restricted creatively. These include Sasa Gedeon and Petr Zelenka (Czech Republic), Martin Sulik (Slovakia), Bela Tarr (Hungary), Želimir Žilnik (Serbia), Jan Cvitkovic (Slovenia), Tudor Giurgiu (Romania) and Sophia Zornitsa (Bulgaria).

All of them work "despite and not because of", and for this very reason their films are internationally successful and awarded prizes, they refuse to drop their own personal signature and independent critical thought. In May 2004 on the occasion of the Tranilvania International Film Festival in Cluj/Kolozsvár/Klausenburg, Romania, which he founded in 2001 in the face of every conceivable form of national resistance the young Romanian director, producer and festival director Tudor Giurgiu said in a thoughtfully self-assured way: "Just because you've got to eat, doesn't mean you have to make yourself a cultural whore."

He is assured of the contempt of those who once held power and of the new power holders, but this is no reason for him to endanger his passion for the cinema or his moral integrity. Times will get harder: in all countries the numbers going to the cinema are decreasing or at best remaining constant, production costs are rising, international concerns are establishing themselves with multiplex cinema complexes, which they fill primarily with US films. The same situation that prevails throughout the fine, new, free Europe. The so-called free market also knows several forms of dictatorship. Recognising these is essential for survival. And a few indispensable persons have started to react...

You can find reviews by Otto Reiter of the current film scenes in Slovakia, Hungary, Czech Republic, Serbia, Slovenia and Croatia in this edition of the magazine.

Otto Reiter was born in East Berlin in 1957: He studied film and theatre and since 1981 has worked as a free-lance film journalist for Screen International, Moving Pictures, Der Standard, Profil, Die Presse, Ö1, Falter (among others). Since 1985 he has also worked as a programme consultant for the Viennale, Österreichische Filmtage/Diagonale, Filmfestival Rotterdam, Berlinale, Filmfestival Göteborg, Crossing Europe and many other film festivals.